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REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES, QUESTIONS RELATING TO REFUGEES, RETURNEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS AND HUMANITARIAN QUESTIONS

SECURITY COUNCIL
Forty-eighth year

Letter dated 15 November 1993 from the Chargé d'affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of Azerbaijan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to inform you that the situation of the refugees and displaced persons in Azerbaijan has reached a critical point. As a result of the intensified offensive by Armenia in the south-west of Azerbaijan, thousands of new refugees and displaced persons have been fleeing from fighting. According to a report published by Reuters on 9 November 1993, Azerbaijan is no longer able to cope with this massive tragedy.

It is estimated that over 37,000 people have fled their homes since 1 November as reported by Reuters, and they have added to the 1 million already displaced from the territory occupied by Armenian armed forces, amounting to 20 per cent of the Azerbaijani Republic. Many of the refugees were forced to cross the Araks River into the Islamic Republic of Iran. Others were settled in an overcrowded refugee camp in the district of Imisli in Azerbaijan, which already houses more than 15,000 people.

It is feared that thousands more will suffer the same fate as Armenian attacks on Azerbaijan continue. There is a desperate need for shelter and food, and authorities in Azerbaijan are appealing for foreign aid to help the refugees survive the winter.

The authorities have been battling against all odds since 1988, when the war began, and have managed to provide for the basic needs of civilians, even though they were faced with an economy in ruins and political upheaval. But, as Kaiser Zaman, Deputy Chief of Mission for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), was quoted as having said "What the Azeris have done is amazing, but they have probably reached the limit".

On 7 and 8 November, other foreign news agencies reported that Armenian forces were using the same scorched-earth policy in the newly occupied territories of Azerbaijan as was used earlier in other offensives in other parts of Azerbaijan. The agencies reported that since 6 November fires could be seen along the Iranian-Azerbaijani borders stretching from the Azeri towns of Khoda Afarin to Aslanduz. Armenian forces have previously been accused of setting fires to buildings, cities and, in some cases, even forests.

Political observers believe that the Armenian forces' scorched-earth policy is further complicating the Karabakh conflict and making it difficult to reach a solution. Although the extensive destruction caused by the war cannot be reversed overnight, a political solution to the Karabakh conflict would make it possible for Azeri refugees to return to their homes. Even if a political solution is achieved, however, the effects of a scorched-earth policy will ensure that these areas will not be inhabitable for many years.

I would be grateful if you would have the present letter circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 113, and of the Security Council.

(Signed) Yashar ALIYEV
Counsellor
Chargé d'affaires